

Contemporary Native American Education Issues in the United States:

A Year in Review

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As immediate past president of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA-2007-08), I traveled throughout the country to promote and advance the educational issues pertinent to Native American students. My tenure as NIEA president and also professor of education at Northern Arizona University culminated with an invitation by the Turkish Coalition of America to tour Turkey along with several other participants, including other Native Americans and African Americans. The primary purpose of the tour was to promote cross-cultural exchanges between American Minority Serving institutions of higher learning and Turkey. The tour provided an opportunity to meet both Turkish and American dignitaries as well as Turkish university administrators, faculty and students. It is through this cultural exchange that I was invited to submit an article to the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* highlighting contemporary issues in Native American education.

The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) is the largest and oldest educational organization serving American Indian, Alaska Native (AI/AN) and Native Hawaiian students and educators with a membership base of approximately 3,000 individuals. NIEA members represent early childhood, elementary, secondary and postsecondary students and educators, parents, elders, tribal leaders, policymakers, institutions of higher education and national, regional, state and tribal constituents. The association's core mission is to advocate and promote educational equity and access for Native students. Collaborative efforts among NIEA and Native American tribes advocate for the unique educational and culturally-relevant academic needs of Native students to ensure that the United States government upholds its trust responsibility vis-à-vis its treaty rights for the educational attainments and pursuits of Native students.

Since its inception in 1970, NIEA has brought forward critical issues impacting Native students in the areas of native language revitalization, culture, curriculum and professional development, research, American Indian studies, parental and community involvement, and government policymaking within the context of tribal sovereignty and self-determination values (Antel). Progress has been made and achievements accomplished in these ensuing forty years through NIEA and Native and non-Native educators, leaders and advocates who have persevered as these and other critical issues remain relevant for Native students. During my term, NIEA's six program initiatives included Native Language Revitalization, Reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB), Native Children's Agenda, High

School Policy Reform, in addition to two initiatives that I spearheaded as president; Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and the National Native Cultural Education Standards (NNCES) were at the crux of Indian education this past year.

Two central themes resonating loudly throughout NIEA's efforts were focused on the obligatory federal funding of Indian education and the importance of incorporating Native languages and cultures within the curricula. In general, Native American students have not had the same educational opportunities other students are provided as their socioeconomic conditions and consequently their lack of educational attainments, at all levels, testify to these inequities. Native Americans tend to rank at or near the bottom of nearly every social, health and economic indicator. During 1999-2001, poverty and unemployment rates for Native Americans were near or more than double the national rates (USCCR 8) and the 2000 Census reported that almost a third of Native children live below the federal poverty level with those living on reservations at a much higher percentage. In addition, the disparities of federal funding for Native student services and programs and the backlog of these unmet needs is unconscionable as these cuts in Native education are exacerbated by the negative effects of previous budget cuts (Gilbert Annual Address 6). The lack of adequate federal funding contributes to school facilities that are aged and unsafe which pose serious health risks; textbooks, laboratories, and equipment that are outdated or nonexistent; understaffed and underpaid teachers which create high teacher turnovers; student transportation issues and costs which impact student attendance; and curricula that is not culturally relevant (Gilbert House BIE; USCCR xi).

As a result of these substandard conditions and related issues, the achievement gap between Native and their non-Native counterpart is wide and the efforts to narrow that gap continue to be a high priority. According to the 2007 National Indian Education Study, a report conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) focused on the performance results for grades 4 and 8 reading and mathematics assessments on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Both the average reading and mathematic scores for American Indian and Alaska Native fourth and eighth grade students showed no significant change since 2005 and were lower than the improved scores for their non-Native counterparts in 2007; however the Native fourth graders increased in the percentage of students performing at or above the Proficient level (Moran et al. 8, 44).

Another focal point in Indian education continued to be the importance of native language and culture in educating Native students. Historically, federal policy stripped Indian children of their language and culture in order to assimilate them into mainstream society. A number of factors contributed to the suppression and elimination of Native American languages, therefore decreasing the number

of fluent Native speakers. One major contributor to Native language loss has been coercive assimilative federal policies carried out through schools (Reyhner 33-34). However, current research is demonstrating that native languages and cultures augment the educational achievements for Native students. For example, culturally-based education is the integration and/or the immersion of native cultural knowledge which includes language, culture, traditions, values, mores, and history. Through the course of my own research agenda and advocacy efforts, I have stated that it is imperative that educators provide innovative methods to teach Native students and do it in a manner that validates their rich cultural heritage in an academically rigorous, culturally relevant and responsive manner. The educational system “can provide students with an education that honors their Native identity while simultaneously preparing them to function, succeed and compete in a global society by providing an opportunity to incorporate into the curriculum and instruction their rich cultural heritage, language, traditions, and native ways of knowing” (Gilbert “Impact”).

1. Native Language Revitalization—Languages Die when Fewer or No Child Speakers Remain

NIEA was instrumental in leading the efforts of the passage of the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act which was signed by President George W. Bush on December 14, 2006 (Pub. L. 109-394). Esther Martinez was a Tewa story teller and traditional bearer from the New Mexico pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh and demonstrated a life long commitment to ensuring that her Tewa language and culture be kept alive through teaching, storytelling and writing Tewa dictionaries (National Endowment for the Arts). This legislation was a crucial moment in Indian education as Indigenous languages are disappearing at alarming rates. It is estimated that by the year 2050, if nothing is done to stem the language loss, only twenty Native American languages will be spoken compared to 300 languages that existed before European contact. Native people understand that without their native language, a culture dies and with it, a people’s identity dies.

In January 2008, I facilitated a NCLB Listening Session in Anchorage, Alaska. The single thread woven throughout the session was the importance of maintaining and preserving Alaska Native languages. The last speaker of the Eyak language, Marie Smith Jones, had just passed away and with her a living treasure, the Eyak language (McKinney). Many years were spent recording Ms. Jones speaking her native tongue; however, there are no children who are fluent Eyak speakers, and it is at this crucial developmental stage that languages are maintained, strengthened and kept alive. The urgency to revitalize Native languages is evident among the younger generation, many of whom do not speak their Native language fluently. Any language is endangered if fewer or no child speakers remain to continue the linguistic heritage.

The intent of the Esther Martinez Act is to preserve and enhance fluency of Native languages through the establishment of Native language nests, survival schools and immersion programs to facilitate the preservation, maintenance and protection of our Native languages. This was a major victory considering the U.S. Congress had not passed a Native language bill in the last 14 years and shortly thereafter congressional appropriations for two million dollars was earmarked for the legislation as well as a request for additional funding for the fiscal year 2009 President's Budget (Gilbert Senate). This was not only instrumental in Native people's quest to save their languages, but also initiated the government funding urgently needed to slow these language losses. NIEA continues to request additional funding to support Native language immersion and restoration programs through the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (Gilbert DHHS).

To further the commitment to language revitalization, NIEA along with five other national native organizations known as the Consortium of Native Organizations united together to present a:

joint policy regarding indigenous languages and culturally-based education programs for American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiian students . . . based on two principles: the social, cultural, psychological, and intellectual well being of Native children will be enhanced by these programs; and indigenous languages and cultures are unique to the Americas and Hawaii and are an important part of our country's national identity . . . the Consortium positions that language and culture play a significant role in influencing academic performance and general well-being of Native peoples and was reflected first in the Meriam Report of 1928 and reinforced in . . . [other federal reports and legislation] (Consortium).

2. Reauthorization of No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) — Narrowing the Academic Achievement Gap

NIEA's 2007-08 legislative priority was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965; otherwise known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Pub.L.107-110). The purpose of the law was to "close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility and choice, so that no child is left behind" which is a laudable goal, but nonetheless has created nationwide controversy over the unintended consequences of the law. NCLB's high stakes testing devised a one-size-fits-all approach that is incongruent to the various learning styles of

all children. However a much better method to gauge academic achievement is measuring individual student's progress over time such as the portfolio assessment that maintains a long term record of student improvement rather than the punitive measures inherent in NCLB. The mandate to provide students with highly qualified teachers has had negative consequences for rural and isolated Native communities, due to the fact that out of necessity one teacher may teach multiple subjects, yet not have separate degrees in each of those subject areas. Exacerbating this further, high teacher turnover rates hamper teacher recruitment and retention efforts. In order to mitigate these circumstances, NIEA promotes building capacity within the Native communities' paraprofessionals and cultural practitioners to assist in alleviating the high teacher turnover rates. These and numerous other critical issues have unveiled a myriad of concerns with regard to NCLB's accountability, flexibility, and choice provisions. NCLB reauthorization was due in the fall of 2007; however the reauthorization has been postponed, most likely until 2010.

In preparation for the reauthorization, beginning in 2005, NIEA held eleven field hearings at key sites providing opportunities for the Native voice to be heard regarding the impact of NCLB on Native students (Beaulieu, Sparks and Alonzo 3). Since the 2007 reauthorization was postponed, it provided time to solicit additional public input and bring our collective concerns and recommendations forward to Congress. In addition to the NIEA sponsored field hearings, NIEA was also instrumental in coordinating NCLB congressional field hearings. This was the first time Congress held field hearings within Native communities regarding NCLB. As President-Elect, I testified before the United States House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee on the Reauthorization of No Child Left Behind in Indian Country, April 2007 (Gilbert NCLB). This congressional hearing was held on the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona and chaired by U.S. Representative Dale Kildee of Michigan. Later that summer, President Malina-Wright testified at another congressional field hearing held by the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pension Committee at the Santa Fe Indian School and conducted by Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico. The testimony included NIEA's proposed amendments to the reauthorization of NCLB which were garnered and developed from the NCLB sponsored field hearings and other public forums begun in 2005 (Beaulieu 34-37). In essence, the NCLB testimony identified critical improvement areas for Native students' academic achievement and success through effectual and relevant educational programs, pedagogies, and epistemologies. It thereby provided opportunities for tribal consultation and involvement in establishing educational, cultural and linguistic priorities in the education of Native students (Gilbert NCLB).

During the summer and fall of 2008, NIEA also sponsored five Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) regional hearings focusing on educational issues impacting

students attending Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) funded schools which account for seven percent of Native students. The remainder attends public schools. These schools are located in twenty three states and include 48,000 elementary and secondary students as well as tribal colleges, universities, technical and post-secondary schools. Pertinent issues include the NCLB mandate of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), Indian school construction, facilities maintenance, student transportation and costs, teacher recruitment and retention, standards and assessments which, these and other BIE related topics, are reflected in NIEA's proposed amendments to NCLB. For example, BIE students attend schools that are on the average sixty years old compared to the forty year average for public schools and some of these buildings contain hazardous materials such as asbestos and radon placing students and staff at risk. BIE funded school buses will travel close to 15 million miles during the 2008-09 academic year, many times on unpaved roads increasing maintenance and replacement costs (Gilbert BIE 7-8).

Over 200 witnesses testified at both NIEA sponsored field and regional hearings, but one individual's testimony continues to ring in the hearts and minds of the Native community provided at the Window Rock, Arizona BIE regional hearing by Samantha Todechine. At the time, Samantha was a Navajo eight-year-old third grade student at Black Mesa Community School in the remote and isolated reservation area of Pinon, Arizona. She testifies:

Good Afternoon,

My name is Samantha Todechine. I am near the water clan. I go to school at Black Mesa Community School. During the winter or when it rains, the road gets muddy . . . the bus driver always tries to stay on the road, but we always slide off the road. This past winter was terrible. I live across the wash. The bus couldn't get across the wash to pick us up. So me and my two sisters had to walk about a mile to meet the bus. I was crossing the wash, when I lost both sides of my shoes in the mud. The bus driver and my sister helped me cross the wash and tried to find my shoes.

With students living on rural reservations and in isolated communities, the sheer inability to get to school due to unimproved road conditions further accentuates students' difficulties in making AYP especially, if they physically cannot get to school due to the hindrances in transporting them over vast areas of land. Samantha and her classmates may travel four hours to get to and from school; however inclement weather necessitates seven hours for the same round trip. Samantha shared her story so that others would hear and better understand the plight she and other BIE students encounter daily as they struggle to obtain an education.

In September 2008, I testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Education and Labor Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education chaired by U.S. Representative Dale Kildee (Gilbert BIE). This congressional hearing was specifically NCLB focused on Challenges Facing Bureau of Indian Education Schools in Improving Student Achievement. I shared Samantha's story, along with other issues raised at the five BIE regional hearings. At the conclusion of this congressional hearing, committee members were encouraged to visit BIA funded schools and the respective communities to see firsthand the concerns and issues impeding BIE student academic achievements. Efforts by federal, state, local and tribal governments as well as national organizations continue to work on improving the legislative language to amend NCLB and its pending reauthorization. NIEA's commitment to accountability, high standards and rigorous education for our students are at the forefront of these efforts.

3. Native Children's Agenda—Improving the Lives of all Native Children

There are many factors that impede a Native child's educational attainments. Some factors are reflected in the educational system and inadequate federal funding, but related to these is the safety, health, physical and mental well-being of Native students. The Native Children's Agenda focuses on a key issue that every child deserves a safe and healthy learning environment. One of the concerns that Native communities encounter is providing a safe environment for students, whether it is in the home, schools or the Native community. To provide this type of environment, a comprehensive agenda is required that holistically encompasses the child's learning environment. This comprehensive effort takes into consideration their safety, health, and mental well-being, as well as their schooling (Native Children).

Opportunities to grow and develop into healthy contributing members of our society and Native communities are lost when we fail to provide an environment where children are nurtured and supported. It is imperative that Native communities become involved at every level of a child's life. Families play an instrumental part in the developmental process of a child's educational success; after all education begins at home and parents are a child's first teacher.

For example, in my culture, the Hopis have a tradition called "tiquaci." When a Hopi child is born, the child is isolated for 20 days from everyone in the village with the exception of the parents and the godmother. The godmother's responsibility is to take care of the newborn baby and its mother. During this time, the child has not been named. At the end of the 20 day period at predawn, the aunts wash the baby and the mother and symbolically wash their hair with an ear of corn; thereupon all the aunts give the child names from their clans. Prayers are offered for the child that this

child will be healthy and have a bountiful life and live to a ripe old age.

Since the godmother has been taking care of both mother and child, she is given the privilege, just as the sun is rising, of publicly introducing the child, using all the names the aunts have given to this child. At this time, the village crier makes an announcement that there is a new child in the village. When the aunts and the baby return, the entire village is invited to the feast in honor of the child. This Hopi tradition is still practiced today and many others have similar traditions within their communities (Taylor).

Various reasons exist for this age old tradition and illustrate that the well-being of both the baby and mother takes preeminence and should continue in this child's life by both the family and the native community. The same love and care provided to this newborn child should be carried throughout this child's life thereby recognizing the essentials of a safe environment for the child.

NIEA partnered with several national native organizations on the Native Children's Agenda coalition work to positively impact the education of Native youth through a safe learning environment. As tribal communities we have an obligation and a responsibility to address and remedy the issues confronting our children and families which include poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, obesity, diabetes, high dropout rates and low graduation rates. Given these and other issues impacting our native families and children, native communities must ensure that Native children have the necessary resources needed to realize their fullest potential. The partnership, sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation, includes the National Congress American Indian (NCAI), National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), National Indian Health Board (NIHB), National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) and NIEA.

4. High School Policy Reform—Seven Thousand Students Vanish Everyday

The United States currently faces a serious dilemma regarding its educational system and the national high school dropout crisis. If efforts for immediate reform are not addressed and implemented, this national crisis will severely impact not only the students, but every segment of our society. The issues impacting America are not only the high dropout rates, but also the college and workforce preparedness of its graduating students, many of whom are not acquiring the necessary 21st century skills to be college and/or workforce ready.

At the end of the 2003 academic school year, 4.10 million ninth grade students were enrolled in the United States; however four years later only 2.87 of those 4.10 million students graduated (Alliance "Crisis"). These numbers are staggering! Over

one million students did not graduate with a regular diploma from high school that year equating to seven thousand students vanishing daily into an abyss of lost wages, poor health and a myriad of other ramifications including reduced opportunities for better employment and a sound future (Wise 2). However, if the dropout students from the class of 2007 had graduated, instead of \$329 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes, our nation's economy would have benefited from this income through tax revenues, increased productivity and purchasing power (Alliance "Economic"). It is estimated that over a high school dropout's lifetime, the cost to the nation is approximately \$260,000 and if this rate continues, these expenses will escalate to three trillion dollars within the next decade (Wise 204).

These alarming dropout statistics are extremely detrimental to minority students as more than half fail to graduate. Approximately 71 percent of all students graduate from high school with their peers, but only about 50 percent of African American, Hispanic and Native Americans graduate. During the 2004-05 school year, 50.6 percent of Native Americans graduated, a small improvement over the 2003-04 graduation rate of 49.3 percent; however still well below the national average (Venegas).

On June 19, 2007, NIEA joined the Campaign for High School Equity (CHSE), a diverse coalition of national organizations. CHSE was convened and coordinated by the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national policy and advocacy organization whose efforts focus on reforming and revitalizing America's secondary schools. In addition, NIEA received a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant to assist in its efforts on Native high school policy reform to influence policy, advocacy training, develop briefing materials and participate at venues highlighting reform that includes culturally-based practices for Native students. In June 2008, I spoke at an Alliance congressional briefing, "Culturally Based Teaching: A Model for Student Success," co-sponsored by CHSE in Washington D.C. The purpose of the event was to discuss culturally-based teaching practices and utilize these methods to bolster academic achievement success and social development (Gilbert "Impact"). The negative consequences encountered, if America does not make a concerted effort for systemic educational high school reform for our students and our nation, are dire and have economic and moral implications regarding educational equity and access for all students (Gilbert "Meaningful Reform"; "Indian Kids").

5. Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)—Native Ways of Knowing and 21st Century Skills

Native ways of knowing play a pivotal role in educating Native students particularly in the sciences where Natives have had centuries of observation, experimentation and application of their environment for sustainability—it was a

matter of survival (Trafzer, Gilbert, and Madrigal 1850). Native ways of knowing or traditional knowledge has been passed down orally from one generation to the next and it is this body of knowledge that can provide the basis for bridging native culture knowledge and Western science in the curricula and classroom.

Considering the concerns highlighted by international and national reports that other countries are gaining an edge on America in the science-related fields depict a dismal picture in America's ability to produce the STEM professionals required to remain competitive in the 21st century (OECD 22, 53; National Academy of Sciences 3). According to the NAEP 2005 Mathematics assessment, approximately one-fifth of 4th grade students and one-third of the 8th grade students lacked competency in basic mathematical computations (Perie 14,16). In addition, The Status and Trends in the Education of American Indians and Alaska Natives report show that AI/AN students' science assessment NAEP 2000 scores were lower, on average, than their White counterparts for grades 4, 8, and 12; mathematic assessment NAEP 2003 scores for AI/AN 4th grade students were also lower than White and Asian Pacific Islanders (Freeman and Fox 54, 58). These achievement gaps preclude Native students from entering into the science-related fields, especially if students do not obtain the necessary skills at the elementary and secondary grade levels required to be fully qualified for admission into STEM oriented degrees.

It therefore behooves educators to seek innovative methods to teach Native students in a manner that increases science and math literacy and is culturally relevant given the plethora of traditional knowledge indigenous people have acquired. I directed the Native Science Connections Research Project, a National Science Foundation grant at Northern Arizona University which demonstrated that integrating Native language, culture and traditions into the school's science elementary curriculum improved student academic achievement and attitudes toward science and science education while simultaneously revitalizing and preserving tribal culture knowledge (Carrasco and Gilbert). This culturally and inquiry-based research model has been successfully replicated with other content areas such as language arts, mathematics and social studies as well as with other grade levels. This is only one example of several innovative methods that are successfully improving Native student academic achievement in order to provide them access to science-related fields that have been severely underrepresented by Native Americans.

NIEA partnered with the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) and NCAI to assist educators and inform tribal leaders in developing critical skills and creative ways to enhance and encourage Native students in achieving success in STEM oriented programs and careers (Gilbert, Garcia, and Duff). Being prepared with the skills necessary to succeed in STEM oriented degrees and careers can influence Native communities' social, educational and economic infrastructure, strengthen tribal sovereignty and enhance our communities' well-being.

6. National Native Cultural Education Standards—Linguistically and Culturally Appropriate Standards and Assessments

In recent years, there has been a movement by AI/AN and Native Hawaiians to move forward with the development of Native cultural education standards or guidelines that represent the cultural values of their communities. The rationale for this movement is that our Native children's academic achievements are at the lower spectrum of the educational continuum as evidenced by high dropout, low graduation rates, and low scores on academic performance exams. In addition to supporting academic achievement, this movement provides additional support to revitalize and maintain cultural and linguistic heritages and build tribal capacity and sovereignty within the community (Keefe and Tantillo 8). Given the reoccurring federal budget cuts to Native education programs and the fluctuations of our economy, Native communities need to assess other creative and value driven methods to assist their students' successful academic achievement pursuits. Developing National Native Cultural Education Standards or guidelines is one way to accomplish this, even though we have languages and cultures that are unique to each tribe; we also share commonalities that cut across those tribal boundaries.

NIEA is committed to protecting Native languages and cultures which has also been the cornerstone and primary goal for Native communities in preserving their cultural and linguistic traditions. To strengthen these commitments, NIEA initiated the preliminary discussions regarding the development of the NNCES with NCAI and Harvard University's Nation Building program. The goals for the first phase were to collect information on existing native cultural education standards from key states and tribal education departments, review the standards and identify key commonalities as well as survey the relationship of these agencies in adopting or not adopting these standards at the state level. Phase I examined the objectives and processes that contributed to the success for the Akwesane Freedom School, Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools, Montana Indian Education for All program, and the Native Hawaiian Guidelines for Culturally Healthy and Responsive Learning Environments (Keefe and Tantillo 1). Phases two through four have yet to be formalized, but include national consultation and tribal input at all levels for the development, dissemination and approval of National Native Cultural Education Standards that may be adapted by Native communities and aligned with state or upon the development of national common standards.

The dialogue surrounding national Native cultural education standards and assessments should be a priority as the Obama Administration seeks to develop and implement a state-led common standards initiative through internationally-benchmarked common academic standards (Perdue). It is imperative that the Native educational community be involved in the development of these national Common Core Standards, but also creates its own national cultural education standards so that

Native students are not left behind.

Conclusion

In June 2008, NIEA began formulating the New Administration Transition Papers for the White House and the U. S. Departments of Interior, Education and Health and Human Services to inform the new Administration on Indian education policy priorities and encourage adoption of these policies. The papers provide the Administration and the above mentioned departments the nexus for effectual change based upon tribal sovereignty, self-determination and self-governance that will assist in positively impacting the lives and sustainability of Native people and their communities (National Indian Education Association).

Throughout the United States, many Native and non-Native individuals, communities, and organizations are making exceptional efforts in creating effective programs and policies so that Native students may succeed academically and in turn be college and workforce ready in order to be contributing members to their community and our society. Collectively, it is our desire to provide Native students the educational resources, tools, and policies necessary to achieve academic parity and success which may be accomplished through collaborative partnerships and consultations among federal, state, regional, local and tribal entities as well as honoring and fully implementing their educational rights as vested in United States treaties, statutes, presidential executive orders and court decisions. This article is not meant to be an exhaustive review of Indian education issues which would necessitate much broader depth and breath, but rather to provide a snapshot of national issues addressed in the prior years leading up to and including my term in 2007-08.

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